

THE YOUTH ATTITUDE TRACKING STUDY IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: YOUTH KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MILITARY LIFE

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Study Background and Methodology

The primary focus of the annual Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) is a measure called propensity, which is the stated likelihood that a youth will enlist in the military in the next few years. This measure has been used since 1975 to evaluate the potential supply of recruiting candidates. The YATS In-Depth Follow-up Interview Study was designed to explore two areas related to propensity: the context and process of young men's career decisions, and the specific consideration of military enlistment as a career choice.

The investigation of these areas was implemented through development of a 45-minute structured interview, to be conducted over the telephone. Interviews were conducted by telephone to a national sample of youth balanced across regions and urban, suburban and rural environments.

The 1996 YATS In-Depth Interview protocol included a set of short-response questions asked at the end of the interview designed to determine whether young people have accurate information concerning military service. Topics included distinctions between Active and Reserve duty, military pay and benefits, and the nature of military jobs. Respondents were told that these questions required only their best guess and that the interviewer would proceed quickly through the list of questions.

In evaluating the degree of youths' understanding and accurate knowledge of characteristics of military service, responses were tabulated. While we discuss response proportions, they were not derived from a sample survey. Findings might be different from those resulting from these items presented in a YATS survey, for example. For our purposes, however, unaided responses are more instructive about the success of communication about various aspects of military service.

Overall Findings

Perhaps the single most illuminating finding was the proportion of youth who said they did not know the answer to a question. The prevalence of "don't know" responses was very high; for one item, the ratio of answers to "don't know" responses was less than 1:1. Over half of the survey items suffered from high rates of don't know responses; (here, "high" is defined as any item where one-fifth or more of youth provided a "don't know" response).

In most cases, it appears that a "don't know" response indicates a lack of knowledge on the part of the respondent. However, interviewers related the impression that for some youth, a "don't know" response actually represents a lack of *motivation* or *salience*, rather than a lack of *information*.

We then reviewed the answers from youth who were able to provide a response. While the item by item results are mixed, the general evidence suggests that youth are generally not very knowledgeable about the military.

Active and Reserve Duty

- "What is the difference between the Active and Reserve Services?"
- "If a person enlisted in the (Active military/Reserves), how many years would he or she have to serve?"
- "About how many days each year do people in the Reserves have to report for duty?"

Respondents were asked to describe the difference between Active and Reserve duty. This survey item fared better than most. While the proportion of "don't know" responses was not inconsiderable, the responses that were given were generally reasonable and accurate. The substance of the responses focused on contrasts in the annual commitments of the two types of members as well as descriptions of their utilization in time of global conflict. The former usually came in the form of "reservists serve one weekend per month while Active duty members serve full-time;" the latter, "during conflict, Active duty go in first, while reservists are the back-up force."

Respondents were then asked about the overall Service commitment of Active duty and Reservist members. About one-sixth of respondents said they didn't know what the commitment was for active duty enlistees; this

proportion doubles for the same question on Reserve commitment. While the answers to these questions don't seem unreasonable (4 years was a popular response), they do not match reality. Only two respondents said that the commitment was a total of 8 years, split between Active and Reserve duty. The remainder of the responses were often paired with adjectives like "maybe," "I think," and "not sure, but."

Finally, respondents were asked how many days Reservists reported for duty each year. In many cases, the youth had answered this question without the interviewer actually asking it. As mentioned earlier, many youth described the difference between Active and Reserve duty by contrasting the annual commitments of these two types of Service members. There are mixed findings for this item. Almost one-third of respondents said they didn't know the answer. However, those who provided a response have the correct information. "One weekend per month" "plus two weeks in summer" was the common response.

Earnings

- "About how much does a new member of the military service earn in a year?"
- "How does this compare to the pay you would get in a civilian job you would now be qualified to hold?"

More than half of respondents said they didn't know what the annual earnings of a new military member was. Those respondents who provided a response often overestimated (if we assume the correct response to fall somewhere between \$9,000 and \$11,000). About 2 in 5 respondents who gave a numerical response said that military members made \$20,000 or more.

Respondents were then asked how this pay deviated from comparable civilian jobs. Almost half of respondents felt that military pay would be higher than comparable civilian pay. As most respondents were currently or previously employed and, therefore, familiar with their current civilian earning power, it is not surprising, given their responses to military pay scale questions, that military pay is more favorably viewed than civilian.

Job Benefits

- "Besides pay, what are some of the other job-related benefits of enlisting in the military?"
- "How do military benefits compare to job-related benefits you would get on a civilian job you might qualify for now?"
- "How much money can a new member of the military earn for college?"

Health insurance was commonly mentioned as a job related benefit of service members. Housing allowances, education benefits, travel and training were also common responses. Responses were reasonable, and across *all* respondents, relatively comprehensive.

Respondents were then asked how these military benefits compared with benefits found in a comparable civilian job. The military is perceived as offering better benefits by a majority of youth we spoke with. Not one respondent said that civilian jobs offered greater benefits than the military. Some respondents used the phrase "they're set" to indicate that military members had exceptional benefits. When asked previously about annual earnings, some respondents said that salary was augmented by great benefits. Service members were perceived as having few expenses, and could save everything they earned.

Respondents were asked specifically about college tuition benefits. Compared with other knowledge items in this group, this information appears to be directly reaching youth. Over half of those who responded to this question said that members could earn \$30,000 for college. One quarter of respondents responded "don't know."

Jobs and Training

- "What kind of job training can you receive in the military?"
- "What kinds of jobs can members of the military service hold?"
- "Would you be able to use this training in a civilian job?"
- "In the active military, do people get to choose the job they have?"

The responses to the questions about types of training and types of jobs were quite similar. Computers, mechanics, engineering and general mention of technical jobs were common responses. Many respondents said that anything found in the civilian world could also be found in the military. Also, more than half of the

respondents used words like "just about anything" in their answer.

Respondents were then asked whether military training would be useful in a civilian job. The majority of youth said that military training would be useful in the civilian job market. Moreover, only a single respondent said he didn't know.

Finally, respondents were asked about job choices in the military. More than half of the respondents believe that members have discretion in selecting a job field. About one-third of respondents said that this choice was limited. Limitations, according to these youth, were determined by test scores, personal qualifications of members, and what was available at the time. Only about 1 in 10 said that members don't have any discretion in choosing a job in the military.

Differences Across Propensity Groups

Based on their responses to several questions in the 1995 YATS survey, youth were grouped into four categories representing their current level of interest in military enlistment. The definitions of these propensity groups were:

- Joiners is the category that research has shown to be most likely to join the military among YATS respondents. Respondents gave positive responses to the 1995 YATS unaided propensity question, as well as a positive response to at least one of the aided propensity questions.
- Non-Joiners is the category that research has shown to be least likely to join the military. This group responded negatively to both unaided and aided propensity questions, and said they had never considered military service.
- Shifters indicated in responses to the 1995 YATS questions that they have changed their minds about military service. Respondents reported that they seriously considered military service in the past, but they currently have no intention to enlist.
- Fence-Sitters is a more ambiguous propensity group. Respondents made at least one somewhat positive propensity response to the 1995 YATS questions but were not committed to enlistment.

The composition of these groups were revised based on the more detailed information afforded by the In-Depth Interviews.

"Joiners." There is indication that Joiners may be somewhat more informed about military lifestyle than other youth. The primary indication of this is the portion of Joiners responding "don't know" compared to the other propensity groups. In the majority of questions, Joiners were least likely to respond "don't know" compared with the other groups. A secondary indication is the pattern of correct responses. While they were not better informed on every question, their responses appear more accurate *overall* when compared with each of the other propensity groups.

There were a few other notable differences that set Joiners apart from the other three propensity groups. Joiners were less likely to overestimate annual earnings. The mean response was considerably closer to the target of \$9-\$11K than the other groups. Joiners were also different in how they viewed the transferability of military training into the civilian realm. Joiners were more tentative in their beliefs about usefulness of military training in the civilian arena. Finally, Joiners were less likely to believe that a new recruit had unlimited discretion in choosing a job field.

"Non-Joiners." Non-Joiners were much more likely to respond "don't know" than the other groups. It is somewhat unclear how to interpret this pattern. As mentioned earlier, a "don't know" response may indicate a lack of knowledge, but it may also indicate a lack of salience. It may be that Non-Joiners were less motivated to respond than other groups of respondents. This depressed motivation may have encouraged these respondents to answer "don't know" in order to avoid task completion.

There were some particular questions where "Non-Joiner" responses differed from the other groups. Non-Joiners were more likely to say that civilian benefits were just as good as benefits given to military service members. Also, Non-Joiners were more likely to say that members had discretion in choosing their job.

"Shifters and Fence-Sitters." There is little to distinguish these two propensity groups from respondents, overall. These two respondent types often fall between Joiners and Non-Joiners, both in their utilization of "don't know" responses and in the types of answers they give. Perhaps the major distinction between these two groups and the Joiner/Non-Joiner groups is that they appear more heterogeneous. Shifters and Fence-Sitters seem less likely to speak in one voice than their Joiner/Non-Joiner counterparts. This seems to make intuitive sense. These


groups are certainly less defined than the other two groups. Shifters have seen life on both sides of the propensity fence, and Fence-Sitters have yet to make a decision either way. It makes sense that these groups would be more heterogeneous than the seemingly more focused Joiners and "Non-Joiners."

Summary of Findings

The overall finding of this study is that youth generally lack specific, factual information about the military. This is evident by the high prevalence of "don't know" responses. However, we can not be certain what portion of this response is attributable to lack of information and what is attributable to lack of topic salience.

It is also evident that some youth have inaccurate information about the military. Certainly, some questions fared better than others. For instance, responses about the difference between Active and Reserve duty were generally correct. Also, facts about potential earnings for college tuition seem to have reached this population. Other items indicate a gap in youth knowledge. For instance, almost no respondents were able to accurately describe the service commitment of new members.

Finally, there appear to be knowledge differences across propensity groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, Joiners appear to be more knowledgeable about military lifestyle than other groups. Conversely, Non-Joiners appear to be less knowledgeable (or, at the very least, less task motivated). Finally, the Shifter and Fence-Sitter groups fall between these extremes, and the individuals comprising these groups seem more heterogeneous in their response patterns than the "Joiner"/"Non-Joiner" groups.

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